

It's Not Flu As Usual

WHAT EMS NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT PLANNING FOR AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC



Imagine that ten percent of your volunteer workforce is too sick to respond to an emergency call on any given day. Imagine that cumulatively, a quarter of your community population could be ill for as many as three to four months. Hard as it may be to believe, such a scenario could happen -- indeed, some health officials say it's inevitable. The cause: a pandemic flu.

What A Pandemic Flu Could Mean To Your EMS Operations

Each winter, the flu kills approximately 36,000-40,000 Americans, hospitalizes more than 200,000, and costs the U. S. economy over \$10 billion in lost productivity and direct medical expenses. Health officials are now warning of an influenza pandemic, concerned that the avian "bird flu" emanating from Asia could mutate to a new strain of flu for which humans have no natural immunity. The World Health Organization has said that a bird flu pandemic could infect 25-30 percent of the world's population. With that much of the population affected, a pandemic flu could disrupt your religious operations -- perhaps even force it to close down for a time.

The role of EMS in a Pandemic

A common planning assumption is that good disaster response is merely an extension of good, routine, daily emergency procedures. However, the destruction threatened by a pandemic is not only greater than that from routine emergencies, but there are also differences in the types of problems that must be handled, the tasks that must be carried out and the help available. Responding to a pandemic involves more than merely mobilizing greater numbers of emergency personnel and greater quantities of supplies. The planning process must emphasize that the anticipated pandemic will be a local problem; that relief from state or federal agencies will be scarce, if not non-existent. This is the reason we are encouraging you to work closely with Three Rivers District Health Department.

What To Do In The Event Of An Outbreak

Your organization's leaders should pay close attention to the guidance provided by local and state health departments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other organizations that provide assistance in public health emergencies include the American Red Cross, and the World Health Organization. In a worst-case scenario, "business as usual" may cease. Government health officials may have to implement dramatic measures, including shutting down certain businesses that involve high levels of interaction with the public, such as restaurants and theatres. Health officials may also have to restrict travel, cancel public events such as concerts or sports, and close schools.

Depending on the flu strain and based on previous pandemics, public health officials project cumulative absentee rates of 25-30 percent over three to four months. Absentees will include sick volunteer responders, and those who must care for others who are sick. Fear will also impact rates of absenteeism.

EMS PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PLANNING CHECKLIST

Plan for the impact of a pandemic on your organization and its mission:

- Bookmark your computers to www.threeriverspublichealth.org for up-to-date, reliable pandemic information.
- Identify a pandemic coordinator and/or team, with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response planning. Tell your congregation about the threat of pandemic flu and the steps the organization is taking to prepare for it.
- Determine the potential impact of a pandemic on your organization’s usual activities and services. Plan for situations likely to require increasing, decreasing or altering the services your organization delivers.
- Think about the impact of wide-spread personal/family illnesses, community illnesses or community containment measures (quarantines).
- Consider focusing your organization’s efforts during a pandemic to providing services that are most needed during the emergency.
- Work with Three Rivers District Health Department and local healthcare facilities to share about your preparedness and response plan and what your organization is able to contribute.

Communicate with and educate the community you serve:

- Consider your organization’s unique contribution to addressing rumors, misinformation, fear and anxiety.
- Advise people to follow information provided by public health authorities and emergency management agencies.
- When appropriate, include basic information about pandemic influenza in public meetings.
- Evaluate your organization’s usual activities and services to identify those that may facilitate virus spread from person to person. Set up policies to modify these activities to prevent the spread of pandemic influenza (e.g. guidance for respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette and instructions for persons with influenza symptoms to stay home).
- Maintain a healthy work environment by providing infection control procedures such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer and tissues to help prevent the spread of the virus. Ensure adequate air circulation. Post tips on how to stop the spread of germs.

SEASONAL FLU	PANDEMIC FLU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Occurs every year during the winter months. ▪ Affects 5-20 percent of the U.S. population. ▪ Most people recover within a week or two. ▪ Vaccination is effective because the virus strain in circulation each winter can be fairly reliably predicted. ▪ Annual vaccination, when the correct virus strain is used, is fairly reliable and antiviral drugs are available for those most at risk of becoming seriously ill. ▪ 36,000-40,000 deaths in the U.S. each year. ▪ Deaths generally confined to “at risk” groups, such as the elderly (over 65 years of age); the young (children aged 6-23 months); those with existing medical conditions like lung diseases, diabetes, cancer, kidney, or heart problems; and people with compromised immune systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Occurs three to four times a century and can take place in any season. ▪ Experts predict an infection rate of 25-30 percent of the population, depending on the severity of the virus strain. ▪ The worst pandemic of the last century -- the “Spanish Flu” of 1918 -- killed 500,000 in the U.S. and 50 million worldwide. ▪ Usually associated with a higher severity of illness and, consequently, a higher risk of death. ▪ All age groups may be at risk for infection, not just “at risk” groups. Otherwise fit adults could be at relatively greater risk, based on patterns of previous epidemics. For example, adults under age 35 (a key segment of the U.S. workforce) were disproportionately affected during the 1918 pandemic. ▪ A vaccine against pandemic flu may not be available at the start of a pandemic. New strains of viruses must be accurately identified, and producing an effective vaccine could take six months. ▪ Antiviral drugs may be in limited supply, and their effectiveness will only be known definitively once the pandemic is underway.